

An *Ekottarika-āgama* Discourse Without Parallels: From Perception of Impermanence to the Pure Land

ANĀLAYO

Hamburg University

Keywords

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With the present paper I study and translate a discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama* preserved in Chinese of which no parallel in other discourse collections is known. This situation relates to the wider issue of what significance to accord to the absence of parallels from the viewpoint of the early Buddhist oral transmission. The main topic of the discourse itself is perception of impermanence, which is of central importance in the early Buddhist scheme of the path for cultivating liberating insight. A description of the results of such practice in this *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse has a somewhat ambivalent formulation that suggests a possible relation to the notion of rebirth in the Pure Abodes, *suddhāvāsa*. This notion, attested in a Pāli discourse, in turn might have provided a precedent for the aspiration, prominent in later Buddhist traditions, to be reborn in the Pure Land.

Introduction

The discourses found in the four Pāli *Nikāyas* and their counterparts in the Chinese *Āgamas* and at times in Gāndhārī and Sanskrit fragments or Tibetan translation, and on rare occasions even in Uighur, are the final product of centuries of oral transmission. According to the traditional account, these discourse collections hearken back to the first *saṅgīti* or ‘communal recitation’, to follow the terminology employed by Lance Cousins (1991, 27), the scholar in whose honour this article has been written.¹ Accounts of this *saṅgīti* in the Dharmaguptaka, Haimavata (?), Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayas* agree that at that time the corpus of orally transmitted discourses was divided into four main groups.² These allocate together long discourses, medium-length discourses, shorter discourses assembled by topic, and shorter discourses that involve some numerically arranged item between one and ten or eleven. The Theravāda *Vinaya* speaks of five such groups,

1. Cf. also Gombrich 1990, 25 and the discussion in Tilakaratne 2000 and Skilling 2009, 55–60.

2. T 1428 at T XXII 968b₁₉, T 1463 at T XXIV 820a₂₃, T 1425 at T XXII 491c₁₆, T 1421 at T XXII 191a₂₄, T 1451 at T XXIV 407b₂₇, and D 6 da 314a₇ or Q 1035 ne 297a₅.

adding a miscellaneous section now known as the *Khuddaka-nikāya*.³

It seems indeed plausible that at a fairly early stage in the Buddhist oral tradition some such grouping would have come into being in order to facilitate a division of labour among reciters, not all of whom would have been able to memorize the entire corpus of texts in circulation at that time. In contrast, the *aṅgas* mentioned in several early discourses are probably best understood as referring to textual genres, rather than being a division of texts into groups.⁴ As summed up by Lance Cousins (2013, 106), regarding the *aṅgas*, ‘there is no indication anywhere that any of this has anything to do with an arrangement of the canonical literature in some kind of earlier recension.’

Whereas a basic division into groups, referred to as *Āgamas* or *Nikāyas*, appears to be a common starting point, the allocation of discourses to one of these groups seems to have been rather school-specific. In view of the ongoing demand to maintain the oral tradition, it is perhaps not surprising if different lineages of reciters took varying decisions in this respect, reflecting the need to ensure that each collection attracted sufficient prospective reciters willing to learn its contents and thereby ensure its transmission to future generations.

As a net result of these differing allocations, at present only one complete set of these four groups of discourses is extant, namely the Theravāda collection of the Pāli *Nikāyas*. Although it can safely be assumed that the reciter lineages of other Buddhist schools would have maintained comparable groupings of discourses, at present we only have access to parts of such collections, as the four main Chinese *Āgamas* do not belong to the same school. Besides resulting in some degree of overlap, in that a single Pāli discourse can have more than one parallel, found in different *Āgamas*, this situation also results in the existence of discourses without parallels, in the sense that a discourse is extant only from one of the reciter traditions to which we still have access.

The implications of a discourse having no known parallels are not necessarily straightforward. Although at first sight one might be tempted to conclude that this must reflect the comparatively late date of the coming into existence of this discourse, in actual fact the situation is more complex. An example in case would be the *Jīvaka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, which is without a parallel in the Chinese *Āgamas*.⁵ Yet this does not imply that the Pāli discourse is late itself, or else that the reciters of the *Madhyama-āgama*, a collection probably transmitted within a Sarvāstivāda milieu,⁶ dropped such a discourse from their collection of medium long discourses.⁷ Instead, the reason is simply that the Sarvāstivāda reciters had

3. Vin II 287,27. On the *Khuddaka-nikāya* cf., e.g., Abeynayake 1984, 33–46, Collins 1990, 108 note 11, von Hinüber 1996/1997, 42f, and Freiburger 2011, 218.

4. Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2016a.

5. MN 55 at MN I 368,17–371,22.

6. The general consensus among scholars on the school affiliation of the *Madhyama-āgama* has recently been called into question by Chung and Fukita 2011, 13–34, as well as Chung 2014 and Chung 2017; for critical replies cf. Anālayo 2012, 516–521 and Anālayo 2017b.

7. This has been assumed by Minh Chau 1964/1991, 31f.

allocated this text to their collection of long discourses; the recently discovered Sanskrit fragment *Dirgha-āgama* does indeed have a version of this discourse.⁸

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned first-sight impression certainly carries considerable probability and in the case of the *Dirgha-āgama* preserved in Chinese it seems that the three discourses in this collection that do not have a parallel are indeed of somewhat later origin.⁹ In what follows I examine how far the same holds for a discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, which to the best of my knowledge has so far not been translated or studied, at least in a Western-language publication.

A case study of a discourse without parallels from this collection is of particular interest, because the *Ekottarika-āgama* at times contains rather evolved manifestations of Mahāyāna thought (Anālayo 2013a).¹⁰ In fact the *Ekottarika-āgama* even shows clear signs of a substantial reworking of the collection in China, resulting in the merging together of discourses that must have originally been distinct texts (Anālayo 2014/2015, 2015). Another remarkable feature is the apparent wholesale addition of a discourse, an addition evident from the distinctly different Chinese translation terminology, making it safe to conclude that this discourse would have been added in its Chinese form to the *Ekottarika-āgama* (Anālayo 2013b). This distinct character of the *Ekottarika-āgama* sets it apart from the other Chinese *Āgamas*, which show no signs of having gone through a comparable development in China. In view of this, one would easily suspect a discourse without parallel in this collection to be indeed distinctly late. Yet, as I hope to show in the remainder of the present article, this is not necessarily the case. In what follows I first translate the discourse in question.¹¹

Translation

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was at Sāvattthi in Jeta's Grove, the Park of Anāthapiṇḍika. At that time the Blessed One said to the monastics:¹²

8. Cf. the survey in Hartmann and Wille 2014, 141.
9. Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2014.
10. This to some extent relates to the challenging question of the school affiliation of this collection. Several scholars have argued for a Mahāsāṅghika affiliation of the *Ekottarika-āgama*; cf. Mayeda 1985, 102f (offering a survey of opinions in this respect by Japanese scholars), Pāsādika 2010, Kuan 2012, Kuan 2013a, Kuan 2013b, and Kuan 2013c; on the suggestion by Bareau 1955, 57 that the introduction to the collection points to such an affiliation cf. Anālayo 2013b, 15–19. Hiraoka 2013, however, points out narrative affinities between texts found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* and in the Sarvāstivāda tradition(s); cf. also points raised in Palumbo 2013, 297ff. Yet, as far as I can see, Harrison (2002, 19) is quite right when he states that the *Ekottarika-āgama* 'can hardly be Sarvāstivādin' (pace Palumbo 2013, 102 note 8); in fact, according to Kuan 2017, 446f, a central argument raised by Palumbo 2013 in favour of a Sarvāstivāda affiliation is based on a misunderstanding of a Chinese idiom. In view of the compositional history of the collection and the clear evidence for substantial Chinese influence on its final state, it seems to me that the school affiliation of this collection, at least in its present state, can no longer be determined; cf. Anālayo 2016b, 211–214.
11. The translated discourse is EĀ 38.2 at T II 717b₂₈ to 717c₁₇.
12. Here and elsewhere, I translate counterparts to the Pāli *bhikkhu* or Sanskrit *bhikṣu* with the gender-neutral 'monastic', in order to reflect the fact that in its general usage in the early discourses *bhikkhu* or *bhikṣu* can include female monastics; cf. in more detail Collett and Anālayo 2014.

‘You should give attention to the perception of impermanence, widely [cultivate] the perception of impermanence. Having given attention to and widely [cultivated] the perception of impermanence, you will completely eradicate craving for the sensual sphere, and craving for the material sphere and the immaterial sphere, and you will also eradicate ignorance and conceit.

It is like a fire used to burn grass and sticks, which exhausts them forever and without a remainder, just without traces left behind. It is just like this when, on cultivating the perception of impermanence, one completely eradicates craving for the sensual [sphere] and craving for the material [sphere] and the immaterial [sphere], and ignorance and conceit, [eradicating them] forever and without a remainder.

The reason is, monastics, that at the time you cultivate the perception of impermanence your mind becomes dispassionate. By having a dispassionate mind, one in turn is capable of analyzing the *Dharma* and giving attention to its meaning, without there being worry, sadness, pain, and vexation. By having given attention to the meaning of the *Dharma*, one is not deluded or mistaken in one’s practice. If one sees that there is a quarrel, one in turn has this thought:

“Those venerable ones do not cultivate the perception of impermanence, do not widely [cultivate] the perception of impermanence, for this reason they devote themselves to this quarrel. By quarrelling, they do not contemplate the meaning [of the *Dharma*]. By not contemplating its meaning, their minds are consequently confused. By persisting in this delusion, with the ending of life they will enter the three evil destinies: that of hungry ghosts, of animals, [or] of being in hell.”

Therefore, monastics, you should cultivate the perception of impermanence, widely [cultivate] the perception of impermanence, and in turn become free from perceptions of ill will or delusion, becoming capable of contemplating the *Dharma* and contemplating its meaning. After the end of life, three good conditions will arise: being reborn in heaven or among humans, or the path to *Nirvāṇa*. Monastics, it is in this way that you should train.’

At that time the monastics, hearing what the Buddha had said, were delighted and received it respectfully.

Study

The gist of the above discourse is well in line with the importance given to contemplation of impermanence elsewhere in the early discourses. For example, according to a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and a parallel in the partially preserved *Samyukta-āgama*, insight into impermanence applied to the five aggregates of clinging is a way of cultivating insight that will bring lust or craving to an end and lead to liberation.¹³ This accords well with the indication made in the passage translated above that the perception of impermanence will eradicate the three types of craving, namely those related to the sense-sphere, the material sphere, and the immaterial sphere. In this way, as far as the importance given to impermanence is concerned, the above translated text is well within the ambit of thought generally reflected in the early discourses.

An interesting contribution it makes is to relate the perception of impermanence to the arising of quarrels. The point appears to be that those who get heated up in

13. SN 22.51 at SN III 51,¹⁵ speaks of the destruction of lust (*rāga*) and delight (*nandi*), and its parallel SĀ³ 12 at T II 496b₂₇ of the destruction of craving (愛) and lust (貪).

attack and counterattack in a debate or litigation have lost the overall picture of reality as a changing process, which due to lacking permanence inevitably lacks the potential to provide true satisfaction or to be in some way or another something one can truly grasp and appropriate as one's own. In other words, what is impermanent consequently must be *dukkha* and what is *dukkha* is certainly empty, a view of things that indeed would leave little room for the type of self-righteous attitude that fuels quarrels and litigations.¹⁴

Another dimension of the discourse above that requires further comment is the passage that I have translated as 'three good conditions will arise: being reborn in heaven or among humans, or the path to *Nirvāṇa*.' The term I have rendered as 'to arise' is 生, which could equally well be translated as 'birth'. In fact, to some extent such a translation would fit the context better, since the preceding passage speaks of entering the three evil destinies and thus is clearly concerned with forms of rebirth. Given that the present passage also has three different options, it would be natural to assume that it intends to present a contrast to what has been said earlier. The only problem with such an understanding, which has motivated me, after some hesitation, to opt for the translation 'arise', is that the third of these three options speaks of the 'path to *Nirvāṇa*'.

However, the idea of being born on the path to *Nirvāṇa* could be made sense of as referring to the taking of birth in a Pure Abode. These are heavens in Buddhist cosmology where only non-returners dwell and thus indeed a realm of rebirth that one could consider to be a 'path to *Nirvāṇa*', since all of its inhabitants are invariably destined to reach the final goal in those very realms. Moreover, given that all the inhabitants in a Pure Abode are, as non-returners, by definition free from desire and aversion, it would be a place that offers ideal conditions for further progress to the final goal. Thus being reborn in a Pure Abode could indeed be suitably reckoned a form of rebirth 'on the path to *Nirvāṇa*', by dint of the ideal conditions for progress along the path to the final goal combined with the certainty of reaching the goal in that same life time.

The idea of an actual aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Abodes can be found in the *Saṅkhārupapatti-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. This discourse describes a monastic who is in possession of the five qualities of faith, virtue, learning, renunciation, and wisdom. Endowed with these five qualities, the monastic will be able to achieve various rebirths aspired to, ranging from the human realm to various heavens, including the Pure Abodes. The relevant passage proceeds as follows:¹⁵

A monastic who possesses faith, possesses virtue, possesses learning, possesses renunciation, and possesses wisdom hears that the *devas* of radiance (*vehapphalā*) are long lived and beautiful, with abundant happiness. [The monastic] thinks: 'Oh, that on the breaking up of the body after death I might reappear in the company of

14. As Deshung Rinpoche 1995, 162 explains: 'someone who recollects the teachings on impermanence can very quickly decide what is worthwhile and what is not, and will soon become discriminating about his actions.'

15. The translation is based on MN 120 at MN III 103,1 (the abbreviated parts are supplemented from a previous section of the discourse); for a comparative study cf. Anālayo 2011, 679–681.

the *devas* of radiance!' [The monastic] fixes the mind on it, resolves the mind on it, and develops the mind for it. These aspirations and this abiding, developed and cultivated in this way, lead to [the monastic's] reappearance there.

The *Saṅkhārupapatti-sutta* continues, after having taken up the *vehapphalā devas*, by making similar stipulations for rebirth among the *avihā*, *atappā*, *sudassī*, and *akaniṭṭhā devas*, thereby covering the different realms of the Pure Abodes recognized in early Buddhist cosmology. Each time the attraction of the long life, beauty, and happiness of these celestial beings leads the monastic to aspire for rebirth in the respective realm, and due to having such aspiration as well as the five qualities mentioned at the outset, such rebirth will indeed be accomplished.

Another Pāli discourse of relevance to my present exploration and from the same *Majjhima-nikāya* is the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*. After listing several levels of awakening attained by disciples of the Buddha in descending order, the discourse closes off with the asseveration that all those who have sufficient faith and love (*pema*) for the Buddha are bound for heaven:¹⁶

In the *Dharma* thus well-proclaimed by me, being manifest, open, evident, and free of patchwork, those who have sufficient faith and sufficient love for me are all bound for heaven.

The *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* has a similar statement:¹⁷

My *Dharma* being in this way well proclaimed, revealed, and disseminated without deficiency, transmitted and propagated to *devas* and human beings, those who have faith and who delight in me will, on passing away, all be reborn in a good realm.

Combining this indication with the *Saṅkhārupapatti-sutta* to my mind shows that already among the early discourses ideas can be found that might well have served as a precedent for the notion in later tradition of aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land.¹⁸ I would contend that the similarities between the Pure Abodes and the Pure Land as celestial realms that afford ideal practice conditions, as well as the importance of an aspiration to such rebirth (notably by monastics) in the *Saṅkhārupapatti-sutta* and the reference to faith and love for the Buddha in the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* and its parallel are striking enough to allow for such a suggestion.

The passages just mentioned would in fact be better candidates for such a hypothesis than the discourse from the *Ekottarika-āgama* translated earlier. Besides the fact that the passage in question is ambiguous and allows for different translations, it does not bring in the motif of an aspiration for rebirth in a particular realm nor does it take up the topic of faith and love for the Buddha.

16. The translated passage is found in MN 22 at MN I 142,5; for comments on or reference to this passage cf., e.g., de La Vallée Poussin 1927/2001, 233; Ludowyk-Gyomroi 1947, 32; Upadhyaya 1980, 352; Cruise 1983, 159; and Norman 1991/1993, 184.

17. The translated passage is found in MĀ 200 at T I 766b23; for a comparative study cf. Anālayo 2011, 158.

18. On Indian antecedents for Pure Land Buddhism cf., e.g., Eckel 2003, Nattier 2003, and Strauch 2010.

In this way, the above translated *Ekottarika-āgama* seems to be well in line with the type of thought reflected in other early discourses and in the case of one possible reading of a somewhat ambivalent passage, two Pāli discourses take a more pronounced stance in this respect. In sum, the *Ekottarika-āgama* passage in question need not be reflecting developments substantially later than those evident in the four Pāli *Nikāyas* in general.

This in turn gives the impression as if the circumstance that the discourse translated above does not have a parallel need not imply that it must be late. Instead, it may well be a case comparable to that of the *Jīvaka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, discussed above, although with the difference that in this case no Pāli parallels is known from what by all means does appear to be a complete set of the four discourse collections. Yet, although complete from the viewpoint of the Theravāda reciter tradition, it clearly need not be seen as a complete reflection of early Buddhist discourse material.

The *Ekottarika-āgama* has in fact at times preserved early material. One example is the only textual description of an actual footprint of the Buddha among the early discourses. Here the *Ekottarika-āgama* description has preserved a version of this footprint that is not yet adorned by a wheel-mark and thus quite probably earlier than its parallels, including a discourse in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* and a version extant in Gāndhārī belonging to the British Library Kharoṣṭhī fragments, all of which describe the footprint being adorned with a wheel-mark, which they depict with varying detail.¹⁹

All of the foregoing taken together thus serves to show the complexity of the processes of oral transmission and textual formation responsible for what we now have access to in the form of the *Āgamas* and their Pāli *Nikāya* parallels.

Conclusion

An *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse without parallels turns out on closer inspection to display no definite signs of lateness, corroborating the fact that the complexity of the transmission of the early discourses is such that it does not allow invariably equating lack of parallels with lateness. At the same time, however, the discourse has an intriguing passage which, on adopting one of its possible interpretations, would point to the idea of rebirth in the Pure Abodes. This idea is found in a more explicit form in a Pāli discourse. Together with the indication in another Pāli discourse that faith and love for the Buddha lead to heaven, such ideas might have set a precedent for the aspiration found in later Buddhist traditions to be reborn in the Pure Land.

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19. EĀ 38.3 at T II 717c21 and its parallels AN 4.36 at AN II 37,26, British Library Kharoṣṭhī fragment 12 line 4r, Allon 2001, 120, SĀ 101 at T II 28a23, and SĀ² 267 at T II 467a29; cf. in more detail the discussion in Anālayo 2017a, 23–26.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Q	Peking
SĀ	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SĀ ³	<i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 101)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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Anālayo Bhikkhu is a Professor at the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hamburg. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and books about aspects of early Buddhism, including *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Windhorse 2003), *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (Windhorse 2013), *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal* (Hamburg University Press, 2010), *The Dawn of Abhidharma* (Hamburg University Press 2014), *Rebirth in Early Buddhism and Current Research* (Wisdom 2018), and many translations from the Chinese Āgamas, with comparison to parallel suttas from the Pāli Nikāyas.